

The Changing Form of Mountaineering in Slovenia

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Abstract

Mountaineering is one of the most popular mass recreational and tourist activities in Slovenia. It takes place in both individual and organized forms. Hikers and mountaineers are organized in more than 250 mountaineering clubs which are linked together through the Alpine (Mountaineering) Association of Slovenia. This association was established in 1893. Its membership increased very quickly during the socialist period, especially from 1960 to 1980. A correlation between the spread of industry and an increase in organized mountaineering can be found during this period, when the political system encouraged the activities of mountaineering clubs. Many mountaineering activities were organized within the framework of the public school system. This resulted in an increase in the number of mountaineering clubs and their members. In some municipalities more than 20% of the population were included in such clubs. Large changes took place after the declaration of Slovenia's independence in 1991 and the reintroduction of a market economy system. Organized forms of mountaineering were in many ways replaced by individual forms. The personal standard of living of the population increased, but the number of members in the Alpine Association of Slovenia decreased from more than 100,000 to 52,000. The number of visitors to the mountains, however, did not decrease to such an extent. It was only the form of mountaineering activity that changed.

The significance of mountaineering in Slovenia

Slovenia is one of several alpine countries, and a considerable portion of its territory is mountainous. It is thus not surprising that mountaineering is highly developed. It is part of the general culture of the Slovene nation and is fostered by a range of geographical factors and processes which have unfolded in Slovene territory from the mid-19th century until the present time. The Alpine Association of Slovenia represents one of the largest mass membership organizations in Slovenia. Research has shown that in 2001, 15.7% of the population took part in mountaineering activities. The Alpine Association of Slovenia estimates that the mountains of Slovenia are frequented by more than 3 million visitors, which is 50% more than the population of Slovenia itself (2 million). With respect to mountain hiking trails, Slovenia stands out in the world, with 1446 trails having a total length of more than 7000 km. This means 0.35 km of path for every square kilometer of area in Slovenia (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1: High elevation mountaineering routes in Slovenia are very well maintained. (Photo by Jurij Senegačnik)

Origins of Slovenia's mountaineering organization

As in other alpine countries, mountaineering in Slovenia only developed once people were provided with living conditions in which their primary needs were met and they had sufficient free time and material resources on hand. Mountainous terrain in Slovenia was of course the first precondition for the development of mountaineering, but social factors were of even greater importance. The beginning of mountaineering required a necessary stimulus, which as a rule came not from the population living in the mountains but rather from those in an urbanized environment. The first mountaineering organization in the world was established in 1857 in London, where there were no mountains to be found anywhere nearby. In 1862 the Austrians on the European continent followed suit, and in 1873 the Austrian and German mountaineering organizations merged into Deutscher und Österreichischer Alpenverein (DÖAV).

A similar development occurred in Slovenia some decades later, but with a unique feature – one relating to national identity. Slovenia at that time, as part of the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was subjected to powerful Germanization pressures. In the mountains this Germanization was carried out by DÖAV, through German-language signposting and huts. This encouraged nationally conscious Slovene visitors to the mountains to establish their own Slovene mountaineering club in 1893, the precursor to today's Alpine Association of Slovenia.

The growth of mountaineering as a consequence of industrialization and urbanization

The national identity aspect was at the forefront or at least strongly present in the activity and expansion of the mountaineering organization right up until the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at the end of the First World War. With Slovenia's entrance into the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), a completely different situation emerged. Mountaineering activity within the framework of the mountaineering organization expanded and membership increased more than threefold compared to that during Austro-Hungarian times, but nevertheless, in a predominantly traditional agrarian society, mountaineering was engaged in as a rule only by a narrow class of town-dwellers.

Considerably different conditions came into being during the socialist period after the Second World War, when the basic motto of the new rulers became rapid industrialization according to the Soviet model. From the end of the 1960s on, a special feature of Slovene economic and spatial development was the concept of polycentric development. Accordingly, the state located industrial plants in a number of smaller rural centers in order to reduce regional differences. Within a few decades Slovenia became a strongly industrialized economy with a high proportion of the population employed in industry. Slovene industry expanded rapidly, raising the standard of living of the population in the process.

The development of mountaineering was also closely tied to all these processes. Mountaineering clubs were established not only in individual towns, but also in a number of large enterprises. In this way, places of employment as well as political authorities encouraged mass forms of physical activity, among which mountaineering by virtue of tradition already had a prominent role. Mass activities began to be organized, which in the mountains, and especially on Slovenia's highest peak Triglav, were characterized in particular by organized hikes involving large numbers of people. The organized mass actions mentioned were a typical reflection of the development of a collective spirit during the socialist period, and in some way meant a validation of the self-managing socialist system at the time, although it was not interpreted in that way. From today's environmental standpoint, such mass actions were questionable in many respects, but they were very popular among the people.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, membership in the mountaineering organization increased at a dizzying rate. If just before the Second World War membership numbered 11,000, by 1980 this number had increased nearly tenfold, having exceeded the magic number of 100,000 members. Along with the increasing number of members grew the number of visits to the mountains. In 1984 the Faculty of Sport in Ljubljana found that 450,000 people, or nearly a fourth of the population of Slovenia, went hiking in the mountains (Purkart 2004). Membership in the Alpine Association of Slovenia achieved a peak in 1989. At that time it numbered 114,000, or almost 6% of

the entire population of Slovenia. In addition, there were a large number of visitors to the mountains at that time who were not included in mountaineering clubs.

That mountaineering expanded mainly in connection with industrialization and accompanying urbanization can be best supported by the fact that the highest share of mountaineering club members come precisely from some of the most industrialized or mining municipalities. In contrast, the smallest shares of population enrolled in mountaineering clubs were in some of the least developed and least urbanized municipalities.

Great changes after the independence of Slovenia

In the second half of the 1980s, the economic and political crisis in Yugoslavia gradually deepened, which led eventually to the collapse of the federal state. Slovenia declared its independence in 1991 and re-introduced a multi-party political system and a capitalist economy. Due to the loss of a guaranteed market in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia's industry underwent considerable crisis. With growing tertiarization of the economy, industry lost its former significance, and the share of the population employed in industry declined considerably. After a several years-long crisis in the first half of the 1990s, the economic situation stabilized, and the standard of living once again began to rise. The population began moving away from urban centers to the outskirts of towns and into the nearby countryside. As a result, and also due to the increasing purchasing power of the population, the number of private automobiles soared. In 1991 half of daily commuters still used public transport (bus or train) to get to work, but by 2002 the proportion of those commuting by car grew to 85%.

The mountaineering organization tried to adapt to the new circumstances, but with only partial success. People's attitudes towards organized mountaineering had changed in many ways. The large collective actions guiding masses of people to the mountains from the socialist period were over. In the conditions of a market economy, most employers regarded physical exercise as something for the individual to be concerned with, not as some "obligation" for the company or the state. Collective thinking was replaced by a pronounced individualistic view of the world. At the center of social values was first of all material survival and then a scramble for the greatest possible acquisition of profit and property. Social ties began to loosen, and the former collective forms of spending leisure time were replaced in increasing degree by more individual forms, in many cases associated also with prestige and status (for example, fitness). The elimination of many public transport routes also had considerable consequences. Due to the increasing number of private automobiles, many public transport routes to the foot of the mountains were cut back or eliminated altogether, and the once inexpensive bus journey became relatively expensive compared to driving. In other words, even those who used to travel to the mountains by bus were forced to turn to cars instead.

All this was also reflected in the decreased number of overnights in mountain hostels, and consequently also in the decreased number of members of mountaineering clubs (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2: Today there are a large number of overnights especially at mountain huts in the Triglav area. Pictured is the hut Vodnikov dom. (Photo by Jurij Senegačnik)

In the past people, due to reliance on buses for transportation, were compelled to overnight in mountain hostels to a greater extent than today, when they can drive their cars to the mountains and do a mountain hike in one day. At the same time they are more inclined towards a day trip also because they have less leisure time, due to the demands of a market economy, than was typical under socialism, and because the trip itself costs less. The social evenings that used to be common in mountain hostels are now practically nonexistent (Figure 3). The number of overnights in hostels is thus significantly lower than in the past, even though the facilities for guests are much better than they used to be.



FIGURE 3: Social evenings with accordion music so popular in the past have today become a rarity.
(Photo by Jurij Senegačnik)

Membership in mountaineering clubs has accordingly declined, since it is the discount on overnight accommodation offered to members that is the main incentive for enrollment. From 114,000 members in 1989, the number had dropped to 52,000 in 2005, or less than half (Figure 4). In 2002 the share of the population who were members of mountaineering clubs amounted to just 3.4%.

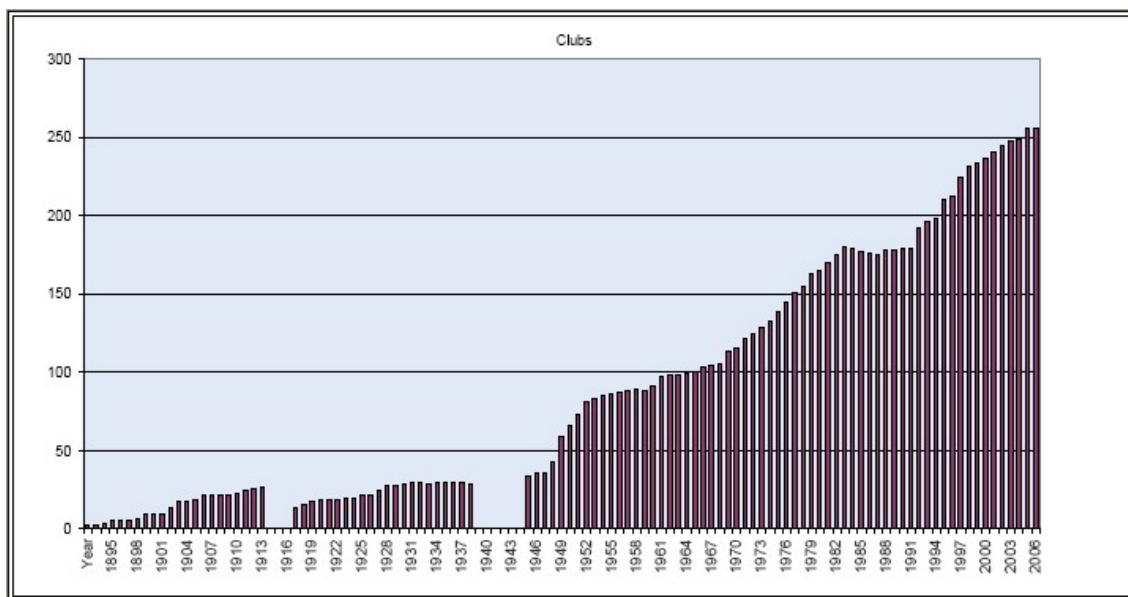


Figure 4: Changes in numbers of members of mountaineering organizations from 1893–2005 (Graph by Jurij Senegačnik)

Despite the drop in membership, we can observe on the other hand a trend of growth in the number of mountaineering clubs. At the time of highest membership in 1989 there were 178 mountaineering clubs; by 2005 this number had grown to 248. There is thus a process of fragmentation of mountaineering clubs underway, which among other things is certainly a reflection of the influence of an individualistic mentality. Mountaineering clubs in 1992 had on average 519 members each; in 2002 this number was only 316 (Figure 5).

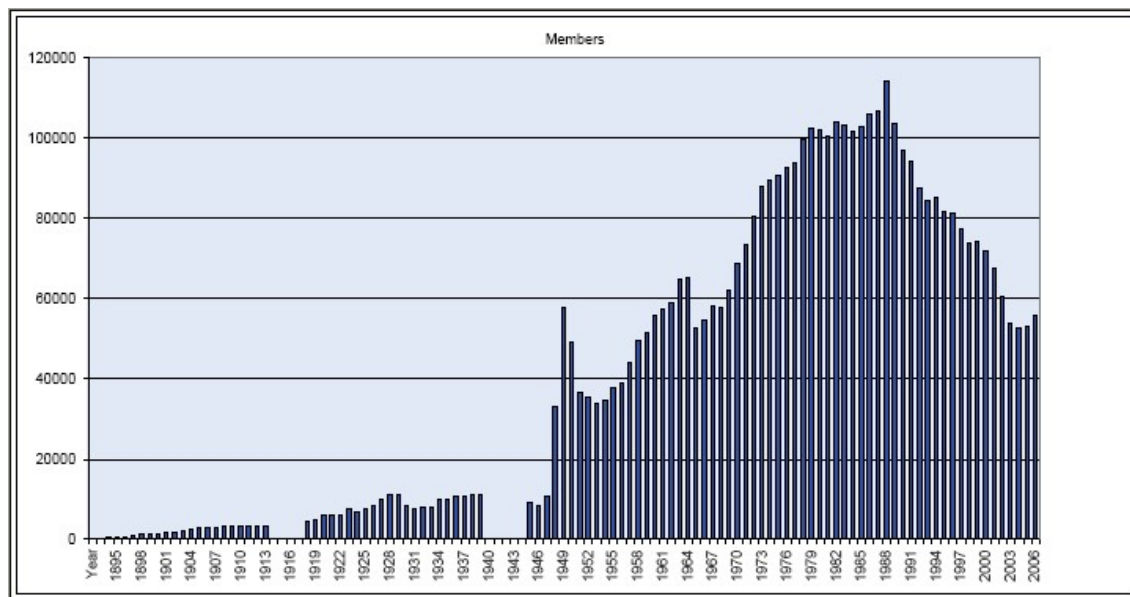


Figure 5: Changes in the numbers of mountaineering clubs and affiliates from 1893–2005 (Graph by Jurij Senegačnik)

Membership has been halved. Today's clubs are not only numerically smaller, but also weak in terms of staffing and programs.

And what about visits to the mountains? We do not have precise data, but trends in numbers of visits to the mountains are certainly not similar to those in numbers of members. In various less frequented parts of the Slovenian mountains, the number of visitors has certainly not decreased. This has been helped by, among other things, several new books – hiking guides which provide individuals with excellent descriptions of access to lesser known parts of the mountains.

Conclusion

It is difficult to assert that the number of visits to the mountains has decreased, but undoubtedly mountaineering as such has changed greatly. It occurs much more in individualized forms than previously and is a sort of typical reflection of the modern way of life of post-industrial society. We need not fear for the future of mountaineering, since the modern way of life creates needs for these kinds of tourist and recreational activities, but the mountaineering organization as such can still experience some sort of crisis if it proves incapable of capturing the “spirit of the time.”

FURTHER READING

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